

LIBERALIZATION IN THE PARLIAMENTS OF THE COMMUNIST ORBIT

1. The Soviet and satellite constitutions define the role of parliament in the government structure as the highest organ of state authority. Constitutionally there is little or nothing to distinguish Communist parliaments from free world parliaments: the executive power is ultimately responsible to the legislature and although the Communist executive admittedly initiates more legislation than does the parliament, this practice is followed in many western legislatures as well; the orbit legislators are popularly elected by direct and universal suffrage; permanent and ad hoc committees conduct hearings on proposed legislation; etc. On paper then, there appears to be no necessity for "liberalization" of the Communist legislatures, in that they are already models for responsible democratic legislative activity. The fact, of course, is that the Soviet orbit parliaments have been and indeed still are, simply a facade behind which the dictatorship of the Communist Party has been exercised.

2. Since Stalin's death, domestic liberalization has been a policy of the Soviet Union and orbit countries. The exact nature of this internal "liberalization", particularly as it applies to recent events in Communist parliaments, has been in many cases misunderstood outside the Communist orbit. It is not to be confused with "democratization". Genuine political democracy requires freedom of expression for political aims, and freedom to attempt to develop an organization to support and implement those aims. Multiple political parties with conflicting views are the expression of this freedom in the non-Communist democracies. The so-called liberalization measures in the Communist orbit do not now and are not intended to permit this essential expression of political democracy. The Communist leaders themselves have explicitly denied again and again that their reforms are intended to lead to this bourgeois (i.e. western) form of democracy. In other words, no individuals (or group) will be permitted to organize support for his aims, unless his social, economic, political, philosophical objectives are identical with those of the Communist regime. Political opposition groups, even a "loyal opposition" have no place in the Communist structure. This fact is simply but usefully illustrated by the election practice of presenting a single Communist-approved list of candidates to the voters.

3. There have indeed been some substantive domestic liberalization measures in the orbit countries, such as curbs on the arbitrariness and brutality of the secret policy, encouragement of certain types of

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criticism, stricter adherence of juridical codes, (such as they are), possibilities for greater exposure to the alien ideology of the west through encouragement of exchange activities. It should at the same time be recognized that in no instance do these liberalization measures represent any threat to Party control since the ultimate safeguards of that power are preserved intact.

4. In the parliamentary field the liberalization has been more apparent than real. This is true even in Poland, where the parliament has initiated dramatic and unprecedented moves. Here deputies have directed severe criticism at members of the executive (all leading Communist Party members); they have demanded a voice in devising essential policies of the government. They have debated the wisdom of some of the measures offered as legislation by the government; and they have even broken the pattern of unanimity of approval of government decrees by rejecting a minor decree. These breaks with Stalinism are still a far cry from democracy; in fact they have only a very superficial resemblance to genuine democracy. It must be remembered that every deputy has been approved by the Communist Party even before he was nominated to run for office. The voters had no choice but him; and while individual legislators have raised their voices in criticism (whether genuine or pre-planned as a propaganda measure to impress the outside world is immaterial), there is no indication that they are permitted to organize other legislators behind them to give real practical meaning to their demands.

5. At the April meeting of the Polish Sejm, the Premier admitted that the legislature's supreme function could not be exercised because of lack of cooperation from the government, although no concrete steps have been taken to reestablish its constitutional authority. At the September meeting one deputy went so far as to make a fundamental attack on the denial of parliamentary responsibility while the other deputies making critical remarks had limited their attacks to administrative organs which are in the process of reorganization, to conditions which had already been condemned by the Party and to social organizations which are about to launch reforms.

6. While some superficial advances have been made in Poland, to give the appearance of an effective legislature, the Soviet Union and other satellites have confined themselves largely to talk about the increased responsibility of the parliament.

7. For instance, the USSR Supreme Soviet met in mid-July for five days and without debate or dissenting vote disposed of a five point agenda. Customary efforts were made to maintain the facade of democratic law making, but once the meetings began the Supreme Soviet slipped into a pattern of behavior not unlike that of its predecessors. After the discussion on proposed amendments to the pension bill, Bulganin appeared and stated categorically which amendments were acceptable

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(all those initiated by individual deputies on commissions) and which had to be rejected (all those initiated from the floor). Not too surprisingly, the vote was unanimous according to Bulganin's wishes. The Kremlin has frequently used the Supreme Soviet as a sounding board for its peace propaganda, and the recent session was no exception. Accordingly, the Soviet legislature adopted an appeal to parliaments of all countries approving recently announced cuts in the Soviet armed forces and urging other nations "to consider and support this initiative of the Soviet Union and to enact in their turn effective measures toward ending the arms race." The appeal was subjected to little discussion at the meeting and was voted unanimously. This appeal was clearly geared to evoke sympathetic response in world opinion, and, in that way, the regime no doubt expects to advance Soviet prestige and maintain Soviet initiative in a field of universal concern.

8. While nothing has been done in Czechoslovakia to change the pattern of unanimity of vote, eloquent praise for legislation being considered instead of genuine debate, very brief sessions, etc., the newspapers have talked about the necessity for increasing the responsibility of parliament. The Czech trade union newspaper PRACE said in April 1956:

"It would contribute to the raising of the importance of the National Assembly if that right which the Constitution gives to the deputies were once again revived. This is the right of interpellation. Every member of the National Assembly is entitled to put questions to the Chairman and the other members of the Government in matters concerning them actively and they are obliged to answer him in terms stipulated by law. Placed face to face with this public control, every member of the Government would feel greater responsibility for rectifying shortcomings for which he would have to render an account before the National Assembly."

This kind of propaganda, intended to show the outside world the Czechs' earnestness in reforming their legislative practices, does little more than admit that in the past and up to the present, the parliament has been nothing more or less than a sham. And indeed, since nothing has come of it, it would appear that in the future the same practices will be followed.

9. In Hungary, the practice of interpellation was instituted at the August 1956 session of parliament, but it must be considered a failure since the questions had little or no real substance, and according to observers the deputies themselves stumbled over written scripts, strongly suggesting the possibility that the questions were planted by the government or the Party.

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10. In East Germany the deputies recently had a field day in criticising the ridiculous excesses of economic centralization. Since however, the SED Central Committee had previously decided that decentralization was necessary and had prepared a plan to carry it out, the active criticism was another manifestation of the cynicism and propagandistic nature of the legislative proceedings.

11. An announcement of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in September 1956 included an item on the parliament: "It is particularly important to elevate the role of the National Assembly as the highest organ of the people's government and the only legislative organ in the country...The National Assembly must be called more often and its commission must be strengthened so that important questions may be discussed from all sides. Decisions taken must be publicized...The National Assembly must discuss more often reports connected with the work of the Council of Ministers and that of individual ministers." Here again is public admission that the parliament has not been functioning according to its constitutional authority.

12. Yugoslavia perhaps permits the most "western" parliamentary activity of any of the Communist states, but even it, of course, reserves ultimate control to the party. It does have multiple parties, although they are all Communist approved and controlled; it has permitted substantive debate on economic legislation introduced by the government; and in one provincial legislature an individual opposed by the Party was not only nominated, but elected. It is not believed however that the government will permit liberalization to go so far as to threaten its political supremacy.

13. It can be said in summary that the much touted and publicized liberalizations in the Communist parliaments have not any real basis in substantive changes. The possibility cannot, however, be ignored that a fermentation may be underway which will be difficult to stop, and that in the course of time, a serious threat to complete Communist Party control can be made through the national legislatures.